

**NEW
POLITICS**

PORTO ALEGRE SPECIAL

**Notes towards a
new politics
new strategies for people power**



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WHY A NEW POLITICS?

First, I should say that the politics I am discussing in these notes is in practice not so new. It's been developing ever since the late 60's – with many precursors before then - in different forms, with setbacks and leaps forward, in East and West, North and South, in practice more than in theory. These notes are a contribution towards theorising these democratic, egalitarian and emancipatory politics that have been struggling from below for so long.

Many of us '68-ers of various hues for too long took for granted what we considered to be a new left politics. Now, it is not simply that other members of our generation are in power, or at least in office, while we and our values are seemingly in permanent opposition, but also that many of the ideas, certainly the language, of new left politics has been hijacked and flown off to the land of privatisation, de-regulation and the market. Familiar terms 'community empowerment', 'civil society', 'decentralisation' - even the 'third way' or a 'new left' have decorated the speeches of politicians from Tony Blair to Thabo Mbeki, via Bill Clinton and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, as they acquiesce or enthusiastically pursue the agendas of the leading private corporations.

Taking back left ideas

This mix of neo-liberalism and the new left has enabled a distorted version of the ideas of the libertarian left to be used to soften the state and public sphere for the process of private takeover. My purpose in defining the left's new politics more rigorously is to take back the ideas that centrist political leaders have misappropriated and to develop them to set out credible strategies for reinvigorating public, social and state institutions in the face of corporate power. After September 11th, and 'the war against terrorism,' one goal of our strategies for democracy must be the underpinning of global alternatives to the political and military power of the US as well as to the economic power of (mainly US) corporations.

Perhaps it is helpful to summarise the underlying impetus for a new politics. Ever since the universal franchise was won and mass parties established themselves and won office, there has been a sneaking suspicion that powerful and unaccountable institutions, mainly private companies, have evaded and undermined the effectiveness of elected bodies (parliament, the congress, city councils). The effects of de-regulation and the unleashing of the market and hence the unconstrained power of those already powerful private interests, and the acquiescence of governments to this, in a process not far short of the rape of democracy, has led people to lose faith in the vote. The old anarchist adage 'If voting could change anything, they would abolish it' has a certain poignancy. 'They' - the economic and political driving forces of the de-regulated market - have almost abolished the vote by rendering it virtually powerless to pursue the reforms that might reign market forces in. 'Almost' but not quite, which makes the need for a new politics urgent. A politics, that is, which does not denigrate the vote or the struggle to achieve it, but comes to its rescue with powerful democratic reinforcements.

The key concept here is political equality, the rallying cry of the chartists and suffragettes. But now we know that political equality at the ballot box can quickly evaporate, dissolved by the pressures of private capital and state institutions which have developed bureaucratic interests of their own. Political equality must be a condition of everyday life. By aiming for everyday political equality, the other side of making state institutions accountable and genuinely democratic, we focus on the people, their demands and their struggles.

THE CREATIVITY OF PRACTICE

We have to learn from our failure to turn the fertile and innovative ideas of the radical movements of the 60's, 70's and 80's into a convincing strategy for political power – one that would have paved the way for a new kind of state and a new kind of party. One lesson is that we paid insufficient attention to the creativity of practice. The one political organisation that has managed to present an alternative politics on a mass scale, the Workers' Party of Brazil, confirms this. Many of its more innovative ideas, its stress on participatory democracy, for example, with detailed, working examples of what this means, are inspired by the practice of the social and trade union movements at its base.

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From theory to practice

In the 70's, the left produced some powerful theoretical critiques – of the state (including the social democratic state) within capitalist society, of the 'actually existing socialism' of the Leninist party. The critics were Poulantzas, Miliband, Mandel, Williams, Bahro, Althusser to mention a few. Alternative practice - new relations between popular organisations and the state, between social movements and the party - was thin on the ground, however, until the 1980's.

By now, from a global vantage point, there is a huge range of partial experiments in popular democracy. Some have been defeated, like the Sandinistas in Nicaragua or the Greater London Council in the UK; some by-passed, like the civics movement in the townships of South Africa, nevertheless all these projects are rich in lessons for the future. Some continue and spread, like the participatory budgets of many cities in Brazil and increasingly other parts of Latin America. Some are still developing or are constantly precarious, like the community-union coalitions developing in Los Angeles or parts of the UK, where they challenge privatisation and seek to control inward investment by drawing on sources of power that cut across the conventional boundaries. Some of these experiments are exploiting the ambiguous spaces created by 'third way' commitments to 'the community' intended to weaken the state. All these 'laboratories' are host to social and political experiments of great relevance to would-be strategic thinkers and activists.

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JOURNEYING THROUGH THE LABORATORIES OF DEMOCRACY

My response to this imperative to focus on innovative practice has been to journey - literally, metaphorically, electronically; to visit these experiments and talk to their practical scientists.

One of my conclusions is that the more successful of these experiments are producing not blueprints for a new politics, but a lived experience of a new kind of bargaining power for peoples' daily needs. Although not a blueprint, these processes effectively illustrate a new politics in practice. To varying degrees, these new sources of bargaining power, mainly at a local level, use principles of participative, egalitarian democracy. Indeed, since their origins lie in the failure of democracy as it is, the motivation for these initiatives has been a drive for more effective forms of democracy. Bargaining power versus multinational corporations and state bureaucracies especially – forces which representative democracy was too weak to control – stems from contact with stronger, more legitimate, more active democratic pressures.

This type of bargaining process, which is all the time straining to present alternatives in its practice as well as its demands, has a special importance in the present international situation. Sometimes powerlessness pushes the left into an exclusively oppositional stance. Faced with the most powerful nation in the world acting in a completely lawless manner, using 'the war on terrorism' to wage war on whoever it considers to be its enemies, it is tempting to feel that local initiatives – where new forms of democracy, or struggles for democracy, are strongest - are powerless. However, I would argue that we need to see precisely these local sources of a new kind of democratic power as the bases - bargaining bases - from which to press for international alternatives that would generalise the principles we have tried and tested locally.

As I discuss some of my 'local' conclusions, I will relate them to this general conclusion. One further caveat is that this notion of a new kind of political bargaining power blurs the distinction between party and state. A new politics is of course about both. But as we shall see from the experiences of the journey, the new democratic initiatives are throwing the meaning of both concepts into a state of flux. For example, this process of creating new sources of political bargaining power can change the local and regional state from being managers of the status quo to agents in a struggle, and promoters of alternatives. This clearly raises important questions about the relationship between the party, the state and also the movements whose autonomous activity is necessary for the democratisation of both. I shall draw out some of these issues. (I hope readers will not be put off by the personal style of these notes – for me it is the most grounded way of addressing issues which are relatively new and for which there is not yet an adequate theoretical framework.)

Collapse of USSR

The journey started in the disillusionments attending the ending of the cold war. Like many on the



left at that time, my illusions were not in the Soviet state, my illusions were in its – and on the other side, the capitalist economy’s – capacity to be transformed. The combination of Gorbachev’s commitments to openness and to a social democratic transformation coincided, all too precariously as it turned out, with the emergence of civic movements that seemed to hold out the hope of democratising and decentralising the command economies without handing everything over to the private market. The optimistic assumption was that this democratisation of the state in the East would reinforce the possibilities for social movements and radical political parties achieving a converging democratic transformation of the market in the West.

EASTERN EUROPE

THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE: FREE MARKET RIGHT VERSUS NEW LEFT

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Lessons came, however, from the shock of witnessing young Czechs - who had demonstrated in Wencelas Square - espousing Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher as their heroes and free market theorist Frederick von Hayek as their guru. Lessons came too from observing the ruthlessly political way in which the US exerted its economic control over the World Bank and the IMF to compress space for Gorbachev’s reforms – a premonition of the similarly ruthless exercise of economic power in the drive to deregulate through the WTO. Lessons also came from envisaging the obstacles that would have faced any project of democratising a command economy, with all its centralising technologies from nuclear power through to the Fordist methods of mass manufacturing; lessons relevant to efforts to democratise social democratic capitalism, equally wedded to centralising technologies.

I had to puzzle out why poor students without any obvious vested interest in the free market would be so enamoured of its principles and how those of us involved in social movements in the West could sensitively challenge their illusion and convince them that socialism can be democratic – whatever name we give it. This led to recognising the importance of something right under my nose: in the social movements - the women’s movement and the radical shop stewards’ movement, for example - in which I was active. There is a vital but under theorised innovation in recent social movements which provides a challenge to the Cold War choice between the all-knowing state and the idea of the ‘free market’, the latter assumed to be spontaneously co-ordinating the practical knowledge of individuals. Recent social movements of the Western and Southern left proposed other forms of social organisation, sharing knowledge for a common purpose, without any presumption of certainty.

The young Central and East Europeans were reacting to years of dull repression based on the presumption that the state knew best, that economic and social knowledge could be centralised through the state. Hayek had challenged the very nature of knowledge that

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this presumed. Vital to the economy and society, he argued, is a type of knowledge that by its very nature cannot be centralised: practical knowledge, the ‘things we do but cannot tell’. This knowledge is often tacit, ‘in the head’ of the practitioner. He took the further step of arguing that practical knowledge is by its very nature individual. This, he said, was the nature of the knowledge of the entrepreneur. From here it was only a few short steps to justifying the free market as the only way the individual knowledge of entrepreneurs and consumers could be co-ordinated.

Socialised knowledge

The detail of his argument does not concern us here. The point is that in summoning up my defence of the new left against these arguments, I realised that social movements from the feminist movement through the radical shop stewards/trade union movement to the green movement also valued practical knowledge. They too challenged the presumption that the state knows best; equally, they would challenge the ‘expertise’ of corporate management. But while the free market right saw practical knowledge as individual, the social movements worked on the basis that it could be shared: it could be socialised, pooled and exchanged for a common purpose, supplemented by other kinds of knowledge – theoretical, historical, statistical. This belief in the importance of practical knowledge and of its social character is surely a fundamental principle of a new democratic politics. It immediately points to the limits of a centralised state of any kind and to the importance of participation as a channel through which people’s practical knowledge can be a vital basis for public policy making.

Recognition of the importance of sharing practical knowledge as a new condition for democracy also points to the importance of forms of organisation and communication which reach out and ensure the full expression of everyone affected by an issue or decision. When we recognise the importance of such knowledge-sharing, our attention is drawn to the importance of people having equal rights to participate in the first stages of any decision-making and at least to have a transparent route to decision-making at other levels (through accountable representatives or delegates).

Of course, forms of organisation that can share practical and other forms of knowledge as a basis for public policy are only one element of a new kind of politics. Participatory, knowledge-sharing forms could well be invented with power remaining at the centre - the powerful being crafty enough to tap the brains of the masses while kidding them they have some influence. Japanese multinationals have been good at such ‘tapping the gold in the worker’s mind.’ Nonetheless, a theoretical recognition of the importance of practical, tacit knowledge does provide an important underpinning for a political programme of participatory democracy. It is an understanding of knowledge which contrasts starkly not only with the individualism of Hayek but also with the narrow understandings of scientific knowledge which has underpinned authoritarian, social engineering forms of socialism.

This belief in the importance of practical knowledge and of its social character is surely a fundamental principle of a new democratic politics.



BRAZIL: OPENING UP THE STATE APPARATUS, BUILDING DEMOCRATIC POWER

My search for working examples of participatory democracy led to Brazil. There, the history of the struggle against the dictatorship in the 1980's had produced a mass socialist party, the Workers' Party ('PT', Partido dos Trabalhadores), which even as the Iron Curtain fell, transcended the dichotomies of the Cold War. As their International Secretary, Marco Aurelio Garcia put it: 'The Berlin Wall didn't fall on us.' The PT had none of the sense of guilt that led so many mass Communist Parties to turn themselves into social democratic parties in the hope of wiping out the past and becoming respectable. Its radicalism was a democratic radicalism with three main sources: the militant working class that was concentrated in the auto industry around Sao Paulo, a radical rural movement influenced by cells of liberation catholics, and an urban intelligentsia repressed and exiled by the dictatorship. Its particular history of fighting the dictatorship produced a view of democracy that combined respect for the rule of law and liberal democratic rights with a belief in the need for stronger more direct forms of democracy to meet the needs of the people and to rid the state at all levels of an endemic corruption.

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Participatory budgeting

The most practical way in which this radical vision of democracy is developed in the practice of the PT is the 'participatory budget', which is now the basis of investment decisions – beyond those set down by the federal state – in many of the cities where the PT has won a mayor and a good proportion of the legislature. Through the participatory budget (PB), the PT and local neighbourhood organisations have invented a way of linking the power of community organising with the formal legitimacy of an elected council. In the process, in cities like Porto Alegre and Sant Andre where PB has been developing for ten years and more, local democracy has been reinvented, a real redistribution of wealth has been achieved and the lives of the poor have been improved with the eventual support of the majority of the middle classes.

PB varies from city to city but in Porto Alegre, the most developed example, it is an annual cycle of neighbourhood meetings where people identify their priority needs for new investment – pavements, schools, health provision, drainage, cooperative industries – and then elect delegates to meetings for wider districts. These delegates apply criteria and rules developed in previous years, which give the priorities different weights. They then elect a budget council, which represents every part of the city. Through an open process of negotiation and reporting back, the overall budget is drawn up and then put to the mayor and municipal council for final agreement. These same bodies of direct democracy monitor the budget's implementation: officials have to report back to citizens' meetings on the progress of the projects agreed through the participatory cycle. After 12 years, direct participation has spread to every area of the city council's work.

The most celebrated result is an end to the corruption that was rife in this and other Brazilian cities. But PB has also altered the city's relation to the private sector more generally, including big

corporations wanting to invest in the city. Not only has it blocked off inside deals between senior officials and private companies, it has given the city far greater bargaining power – and political energy to exercise that power - than a merely representative democracy ever gave it.

Direct democracy

The crucial lessons of Porto Alegre's PB experience for a new politics, especially a new kind of state, are twofold. First, representative democracy is too weak to control the institutions of the state apparatus – let alone the pressures of the global market. State institutions need to be subjected to more direct forms of democracy via which the people affected by their work can monitor and influence the implementation of democratically agreed decisions. As the state apparatus at all levels has become larger and more complex, a widening crack has developed between elected representatives and the day-to-day delivery of services. Into this crack anti-democratic interests have insinuated themselves, whether through powerful private lobbies or bureaucratic vested interests; through arrogance, inertia or simply the organizational equivalent of Chinese whispers by which officials lose track of people's real needs. At either side of this crack, democratic reinforcements are needed. Opening up the budget to a process of popular decision-making is one way in which participatory democracy can come to the rescue of the suffrage.

The universal principle here is that to genuinely carry through the wishes of the people – as broadly expressed through the ballot box - representative democracy needs to be reinforced by participatory forms. These can hold the state apparatus more effectively to account than elected representatives can on their own. Moreover, a genuinely participatory process – for example on the future planning of a city environment – is a more democratic means of elaborating election manifesto commitments than handing the job to policy mandarins who then 'consult' with the people who are given boxes to tick and 'either/ or' options to pick.

Local bargaining power

The second lesson of the PB holds that building participatory democracy into the policy-making process of a city or regional government significantly increases the bargaining power of that local government vis-à-vis national government, and also vis-à-vis various other bodies - international, economic and political institutions and major corporations. It's partly a matter of the democratic legitimacy that participatory processes give to a city – greater than under purely representative government and often greater than the body with whom they are negotiating. Also, by subjecting these institutions to the rigours of a participatory process, which has constitutionally become part of the negotiating process, the city is subjecting them to an

In Brazil, the crucial factor in reinforcing the vote with more direct, transparent forms of democracy was the existence of a political party not only rooted historically in popular movements but with an explicit commitment to sharing power with democratically organised civil society.



unprecedented degree of independent popular scrutiny. This overcomes a sense of powerlessness, builds confidence and widens awareness of rights on the part of local people vis-à-vis national and international bodies. In Porto Alegre, for instance, any major international investment in the city would have to be agreed at the Council of the Participatory Budget.

In Brazil, the crucial factor in reinforcing the vote with more direct, transparent forms of democracy was the existence of a political party not only rooted historically in popular movements but with an explicit commitment to sharing power with democratically organised civil society. But what lessons can be learned from societies where such a party does not exist (the US)? Or where a party with historic roots in the trade unions is in an advanced state of decay (the UK)?

UK. ALTERNATIVES OUT OF RESISTANCE AND ‘THIRD WAY’ AMBIGUITIES

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A journey through English cities coping with New Labour is a bumpy contradictory one. On the one hand, there is a spate of government-sponsored community action. Often community activists are taking government commitments to ‘community empowerment’ in directions that the Prime Minister, at least, did not intend and does not comprehend. On the other hand, the government is pushing local councils, hospitals and schools towards privatising the management of their services and into doing damaging deals with the private sector for their finance. Slowly, often too late, the public sector unions are organising resistance. In the most effective cases, trade unionists are reaching out to users of their services and the wider community. More than this, they are enabling the practical knowledge of frontline workers and users to be the basis for alternative proposals for the way services are run.

I will say more about each of these – the new forms of trade union resistance and the radicalisation of government commitments to community - because each contains lessons for a new politics.

Social Trade Unionism

First, the political importance of a new social trade unionism. It is rarely reflected upon, but the centralised hierarchies that still persist in parts of the public sector were originally modelled on the armed forces. Such anal, top-down forms of management have all too often suppressed the insights and know-how of the frontline staff who deliver services and who have daily contact with the people who use them. Resistance to privatisation shows signs of changing this, leading to an assertion of power by frontline workers, and increasingly the public they serve.

In Newcastle, for example, the threat to privatise the homecare service led carers and cared-for alike to think out loud about what is essential to good care. The picture of care services that emerged was full of skilled improvisation and good will. There are many hidden qualities to good care – like continuity, disrupted by privatisation, and adaptability to the needs of the client. The range of support provided by a good carer is mental as well as physical but choice, and with it dignity for the client,

has often been blocked by bureaucratic routines. The distinct needs of Asian and other ethnic minority clients are part of good care, so is the importance of improving pay and status of carers as it is getting more difficult to attract people to the service. In the resistance to privatisation, the unions are now working with service users and their families to create a charter for improved homecare that will set out the alternative to privatisation and cost-cutting, which is undermining the quality of care.

This is just a glimpse into how the social efficiency of a service could improve if clients and frontline workers had real influence on how it is delivered. Similar improvements would be gained from pooling the knowledge of the train drivers, signalmen, guards and rail users who are campaigning for the railways in Britain to be owned and controlled by the public. Their case for public ownership is not dogma, and it's not about any old form of public ownership. They want to pool their frontline knowledge and skill to meet the needs of the public. This approach conflicts directly with privatisation. Private businesses with all their requirements for commercial confidentiality could never allow such participatory democracy to flourish. New Labour's privatisation plans would merely replace the closed hierarchies of the traditional public sector with the secrecy of the private. Resistance based on alliances of users and frontline workers putting forward alternatives to make public services more accountable and responsive, is a powerful way of winning public support.

The unions need to go further in reaching out to the public and recognising the knowledge of the user-led campaigns which spring up around valued services. Unions also need to consider forms of devolved public provision run by accountable social enterprises that are not out to make a profit, and are prepared to create new kinds of companies involving users, workers and council or parliamentary representatives.

This issue of the social economy and its political significance also arises from tensions between New Labour's interpretation of 'community' and the interpretations rooted in the past two decades of neighbourhood struggles over land, employment, housing and community facilities. An aspect of New Labour's 'third way' was a commitment to 'empowering communities' at the same time as spitting venom at local elected councils. The thinking – not very coherent, the result of a mixture of influences, including the serious need for local government reform – was to reduce the powers of local councils by further reinforcing already centralised systems of funding and applying a simultaneous pressure to privatise. At the same time, the government, from the Cabinet office itself, encouraged community self-help in the poorest areas. This selective support for 'community-led' regeneration was a way of addressing the problems of Mrs Thatcher's worst victims without tackling Britain's grossly unequal distribution through taxation and increasing social security and unemployment benefits.

People don't forget their history – of community development, trade union organising, environmental, feminist and anti-racist campaigning – and as a result, given resources and opportunities, they have a way of taking things into their own hands and moving in directions impossible to predict. One direction that is emerging out of these micro-environments of

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expansion and community control is social enterprises, funded from various sources of public or lottery money and run for the local community rather than for profit. In Luton, for example, an eclectic range of community activists are mixing the libertarian, communal self-help ethic of the anti-capitalist movement with the collectivist traditions of the labour and tenants movement to create a whole zone of inter-connected co-ops and social enterprises. They are using government money to buy an empty factory on their estate and create the infrastructure for this imaginative project.

The social and political integrity of this and other initiatives are vulnerable in the longer run to the corporate predators who could quickly move in to the profitable sides of the social economy once public funding and other kinds of support are no longer forthcoming. These projects illustrate what kind of economic and social organisation a new kind of state could sustain. At the same time, however, they need the support of others, beyond their particular neighbourhood, to survive and to bargain with the existing state and economy. They need to be part of a political process involving the trade unions, political and community activists and a democratic local state.



US: POWER FOR A NEW ECONOMY

The experience of Los Angeles provides one of the most successful examples of an alliance of community and trade union organisations using the leverage of local power to win concessions for the people from corporations and public bodies alike.

The first of several notable community union coalitions to emerge in the 1990's was the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union, initiated by the Labor/Community Strategy. This creative coalition took direct action by effectively occupying the cities buses and providing free rides for the poor. They won huge popular support for their demands for lower fares and better provision. They successfully took on one of the County's most powerful agencies, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, and achieved a diversion of funds from the middle-class-oriented rail projects to the impoverished bus system. The second Labor/Community coalition was started by a Latina-led service union. It forced the city council and the mayor to adopt an ordinance that mandated a 'living wage' for those employed in firms contracted from the city. The coalition, AGENDA (Action for Grassroots Empowerment and Neighbourhood Alternatives), then went on to push for such ordinances elsewhere in the region, including in the major studios of the entertainment industry. For example, they successfully bargained with Dream Works, Steven Spielberg's empire, to create training programmes that would help inner-city youth gain employment in the burgeoning animation and entertainment industries. A third example of this new strategic organising amongst immigrant and poor white workers and communities is LAANE, Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy. LAANE's aim was, and is, to use the same campaigning and bargaining methods of the other two coalitions to ensure that the new high-tech economy instead of being rootless and exploitative of local labour, complies with community standards and meets the needs of the population that it depends on.

Winnable goals

These regional coalitions with their assertive and imaginative tactics, their strategic alliances and their pragmatic setting of winnable goals are a notable challenge to the powerlessness that many people, including past activists, have felt in the face of corporate globalisation. They are rooted amongst the workers and families that have been suffering most from capitalism's global power. Key to the successful transformation of the passivity often induced by globalisation has been the self-conscious development of regional strategies, based on the understanding that in the end, wandering capital does have to invest somewhere and wherever it does it becomes dependant on regional infrastructure, interconnections and labour. This gives a well-organised and strategically-minded coalition considerable bargaining power.

This understanding has been made practical by a careful use of research, which involved creative alliances between labour activists and local academics. A further factor has been recognition of the mobilising power of a focus on working poverty. It's a power enhanced by the unions' recognition that with the failure of efforts to hold on to the traditional manufacturing jobs of the 60's and 70's – the auto industry for example – their only chance of a membership lay in the new unorganised immigrant labour force employed in the service and entertainment industry that had taken over LA. This meant a new multi-racial, community-orientated way of organising that opened up space in the labour movement for unconventional, radically-minded activists who could respond to the new opportunities without the bureaucratic constraints that had previously dogged the trade unions.

Finally, these coalitions have made the most of the fluid politics of California, where the two main parties have little hold on regional and local politics and a popular socialist can gain direct political representation. Several of the coalitions' victories in city hall were dependent on the support of radical independent councillors.



CONCLUSIONS

This then is a report back of insights from my journey so far. I hope its unavoidably partial nature will encourage people to draw from their own experiences so that our theoretical discussions at this World Social Forum will be grounded in the creativity of practice.

Firstly, from confronting the popularity of free market ideas in Central and Eastern Europe came a recognition of the importance for democracy of practical knowledge and its social character. This is key to everyday political equality, and to demonstrating people's capacity for self-

Key to the successful transformation of the passivity often induced by globalisation has been the self-conscious development of regional strategies, based on the understanding that in the end, wandering capital does have to invest somewhere and wherever it does it becomes dependant on regional infrastructure, interconnections and labour.

government. Valuing social knowledge directly challenges the limited but widespread notion of political equality shockingly illustrated by Beatrice Webb, the leading theoretician of the Fabian, social engineering tradition in British socialism, when she said “the average sensual man can describe the problems but is unable to prescribe the solutions.” Such a view justifies a kind of democracy amounting to the masses choosing between professional political elites. On such a notion rest many of our ‘democratic’ political institutions – state and party. The challenge of a democratic politics of knowledge is to develop ways of organising – through a new kind of state and a new kind of political party – that understands how to search out and share people’s practical knowledge, and for both state and party to positively value the democratic, social movements that arise independently of them. Through such movements practical knowledge is expressed, shared, debated and combined with other forms of knowledge. This leads directly to my second point, which concerns a fundamental principle of such a way of organising and links the democratisation of knowledge to the democratisation of power.

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The effectiveness of PB in ridding Porto Alegre of corruption, redistributing wealth and enhancing the bargaining power of the city vis-à-vis the global market demonstrates the importance of politicians sharing power with direct forms of democracy and subjecting the state apparatus to accountability and control. The particular form of PB is not necessarily replicable but the principle of creating a democratic civil power independent of the state but in a framework of negotiation with it, is a condition of everyday political equality.

In and Against the State

In the UK and US, insights into a new politics have emerged from hard lessons of defeats and dead ends. In the UK, a public sector trade unionism has emerged which campaigns beyond the workplace, not only to defend public provision but to make its delivery responsive and accountable to the public. This approach has been forged by activists, some of whom were involved in earlier grassroots attempts to reform public services, but who have learnt from the failure of a defensive, exclusively workplace trade unionism. One way to describe the new strategy is ‘in and against the state’. In other words, the new politics involves a strategy that is both based in the state - defending the wealth-redistributing features of public services - and challenges the way services are managed, setting out alternatives.

In and Against the Market

Similarly, the growth of concerted efforts to create social enterprises, not as nurseries for ‘the grown up’ market economy but as an alternative to the economics of profit could be described as ‘in and against the market.’ Social enterprises, created as a base for spreading and illustrating a feasible utopia, both recognise and accept the market

The new politics involves a strategy that is both based in the state - defending the wealth-redistributing features of public services - and challenges the way services are managed, setting out alternatives.

as a mechanism of exchange while at the same time challenging its present, private profit-based driving force.

The Los Angeles coalitions indicate the importance of mapping the worst injustices and the most strategic dependencies of global capital on particular regions and workforces. The coalition and cross-community/workplace organising of Los Angeles came after a period of defeats and despair. Militant unions' action had failed to stop plant closures, and the new service employers were treating the mainly immigrant labour force as a constantly disposable and replaceable source of cheap labour. Activists learnt the lesson from these experiences and first worked to spread the skill and confidence of self-organisation amongst the previously unorganised. They then deployed the skills of committed researchers. The combined knowledge produced an overview of the worst work injustices and potential bargaining levers to act on it.

Controlling global capital

Here is an illustration of the importance of recognising the variety of sources of power which should be used to exert democratic control over global capital. State power - whether local, regional, national or continental - has become only one (albeit unique) source of bargaining power over capitalist globalisation and US dominance. This points to the effectiveness of a politics which is about co-ordination and cross-fertilisation between different kinds of power for change.

So, initiatives coming from community and trade union movements are a source of programmatic and strategic ideas – which could be taken up electorally by left political parties. This would contrast starkly with the traditional party/movement relationship where the party develops the programme/strategy and trade union and social movements are asked to support it.

A final concluding point: I have stressed the importance of the local, not as an alternative to the global but as a base, rooted at the point of potential popular engagement with struggles over power. Others will have more experience of how to make the connections between this popular base and the global centres of power. In a sense the connections are increasingly made by capital, as de-regulation leads to corporate intervention in the most local of issues. The GATS agreement under the WTO, for example, means that water, garbage, schools and hospitals are all places where a struggle for control is taking place between, on the one hand, citizens, workers and elected politicians, and on the other, multinational corporations invited in by another group of – mainly national - elected politicians. The increasing assertiveness of political equality as a right affecting every area of life is currently mainly local, but it gives people confidence and know-how to trace the links in the chain of injustice to the real – mainly global - centres of power. One of the challenges to activist organising at a global level is to make sure that local activists have the resources and infrastructure to devise ways of making the connections between local organising and having an impact on global power.





The Transnational Institute (TNI) is a decentralized fellowship of scholars, researchers and writers from the Third World, Europe and the U.S. committed to create and promote international co-operation in analysing and finding possible solutions to such global problems as militarism and conflict, poverty and marginalisation, social injustice and environmental degradation.

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